

Pubic Lice

“crabs”

There are three kinds of tiny bugs called lice that live on humans—head lice, body lice, and pubic lice. Pubic lice are also called crabs. Pubic lice attach themselves to hair in the pubic area and sometimes on other coarse hair on the body. They can be on eyebrows, eye lashes, facial hair, and armpits. Crabs are usually spread through sexual contact. The lice or their eggs can also land on beds, towels, or clothing when pubic hairs fall out. They do not hop or fly. They survive by biting the skin and drinking human blood.

Signs and symptoms

If you look closer, the lice or their eggs can be seen at the base of a pubic hair. Many people have intense itching. A few people get blue spots on their skin from the bites, but the spots go away after a short time. Tiny blood spots in underwear is another sign of crabs.

Testing

Pubic lice are large enough to see without a microscope—some people think they are seeing a moving scab or freckle. People who have crabs should be tested for other STDs.

Treatment

There are special shampoos, rinses, and lotions containing lindane that can kill lice. They are sold in drugstores without a prescription. Follow the directions carefully. Talk to the pharmacist about how to use these products. They must be applied correctly and then washed off after a certain number of minutes. They must never be used near the eyes. There are special ointments for brows and lashes.

Pregnant women and children under age 2 must not use lindane products. Also, do not use lindane products if you have sores or cuts on your skin. Ask your doctor or pharmacist for other products. Be sure that everyone you have had intimate contact with in the last 30 days is treated or you will get crabs again.

Wash bedding, towels, and clothing in hot water and dry in a hot dryer to kill any lice that may be on them. Dry cleaning will also kill lice and eggs. Items that cannot be washed or dry cleaned can be wrapped in a plastic bag and sealed for 10 days.

Learn more about pubic lice

If you have questions or need more information, contact your doctor, local health department, or community clinic, or call the National STD Hotline at **1-800-227-8922**.

For persons with disabilities this document is available on request in other formats. To submit a request, please call 1-800-525-0127 (TTY/TDD 1-800-833-6388).